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*Original Citation:*

*Availability:*

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1597816> since 2016-10-13T17:32:32Z

*Published version:*

DOI:10.1177/0022022116661244

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This is the author's final version of the contribution published as:

Gattino, Silvia; Miglietta, Anna; Rizzo, Marco; Testa, Silvia. Muslim Acculturation in a Catholic Country: Its Associations With Religious Identity, Beliefs, and Practices. *JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY*. 47 (9) pp: 1194-1200.

DOI: 10.1177/0022022116661244

The publisher's version is available at:

<http://jcc.sagepub.com/cgi/doi/10.1177/0022022116661244>

When citing, please refer to the published version.

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Muslim Acculturation in a Catholic Country: Its Associations with Religious Identity, Beliefs and  
Practices

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## Muslim Acculturation in a Catholic Country: Its Associations with Religious Identity, Beliefs and Practices

### Abstract

The literature suggests that religion may play an important role in the acculturation process of immigrants by contributing to the maintenance of the heritage culture and preventing identification with the mainstream. With few exceptions, studies on this topic have focused on religion as a whole by assessing specific aspects or dimensions (such as religious identification, beliefs and practices) and creating a composite measure without analyzing the contribution of each dimension to the acculturation process. In this study, the relationships between specific religious dimensions and acculturation were assessed with a sample of 282 Muslim immigrants who were recruited in the Northern part of Italy. Two regression models show that religious identification drives the maintenance of Muslim culture but is unrelated to the acculturation to Italian culture, whereas beliefs and practices do not contribute to heritage acculturation but are negatively associated to acculturation to the host culture.

*Keywords.* acculturation, religion, Vancouver Index of Acculturation, religious identification, religious beliefs, religious practices

## Muslim Acculturation in a Catholic Country: Its Associations with Religious Identity, Beliefs and Practices

The concepts of religion and culture are closely intertwined. Religions themselves can be considered forms of culture because they include all key aspects of cultures, such as shared values, principles, symbols, and habits (e.g.: Saroglou & Cohen, 2011; 2013). More specifically, religion is a part of the larger cultural whole by which people manage their degree of belonging, including ethnic belonging. Although religion and ethnicity differ depending on the society, cross-country empirical evidence has highlighted the relationships among religiousness, ethnic and national identity and pride. For example, when compared with their non-religious peers, young Catholic and Protestant Europeans who are highly identified with their religion show stronger national pride (Campiche, 1997), more intense feelings of belonging to their region or country and a weak European or cosmopolitan identity (Belot, 2005).

Psychologists' interest in religion has taken several forms. Studies have produced a vast amount of evidence showing how religious beliefs contribute to physical and mental health, interpersonal and intergroup relationships (e.g., Friedman & Saroglou, 2010). The psychology of intergroup relations has deepened the construct of religion based on a perspective that sees religion as a marker of group belonging and identification (Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007). A closely related research domain focuses on the link between religion and acculturation among first- and second-generation immigrants. The results highlight an overall negative relationship between identification with a religious group and the adoption of the host country's national culture and identity and a positive relationship with the maintenance of cultural origin (e.g., Friedman & Saroglou, 2010; Güngör 2007; Saroglou & Mathijssen, 2007).

Although religion is a crucial element in the acculturation process, and although religion plays an unequivocal role in the construction of multiple identities (Burris, Branscombe & Jackson, 2000; Saroglou & Mathijssen, 2007), few scholars have investigated the connection between these two

concepts (see, among others, Goforth, Oka, Leong & Denis, 2014; Güngör, Bornstein & Phalet, 2012). In a large international study of immigrant youth in 13 immigrant-receiving countries, Berry and colleagues (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; 2010) found a relation between religious preference and young immigrants' acculturation. Specifically, they found differences in the acculturation profiles between youths from Judeo-Christian and Eastern religions and Muslim youths. The former groups showed a prevalent integration profile (i.e., relatively high involvement in ethnic and national cultures). In contrast, Muslims showed a prevalent ethnic profile (i.e., high orientation toward one's own ethnic group, high ethnic identity, ethnic language proficiency and usage) but almost no national profile (i.e., a strong orientation toward the society in which they were living). In 2010, Saroglou and Friedman found that among Muslim immigrants' the association between religion and psychological acculturation was mediated by the perception of the cultural gap between their heritage and Western. These results are particularly interesting because they trace Muslim immigrants' reduced acculturation to "the combination of group membership and specific religious beliefs in a societal context that is hostile to those beliefs" (Friedman & Saroglou, 2010, p. 193).

All of the above-cited studies agree that religion is a multicomponent construct that includes individuals' emotions, cognitions and behavior (Hill & Hood, 1999) and has practical and individual (spiritual) features. Social scientists tend to identify three main religious dimensions: *religious identification* (attachment to one's religious identity), *beliefs* (orthodoxy, or the knowledge and acceptance of religious doctrines) and *practice* (the observance of religious rules and rites, including dietary practices and worship) (see Saroglou, 2011 for a review). Despite the multidimensional theoretical approach to religion that characterizes almost all studies on this topic, the role of different religious components on the acculturation process has not been examined. In a study on intercultural religious transmission among Muslim immigrants in Belgium, Güngör, Fleischmann and Phalet (2011) found that cultural maintenance fully mediated the relationship between religious socialization in childhood and religiosity in adulthood. In this study, the three

religious dimensions were considered a measure of religious transmission to the next generation. To the best of our knowledge, other studies interested in the relationship between religion and acculturation orientations (Friedman & Saroglou, 2010; Goforth et al., 2014; Güngör et al., 2012; Saroglou & Mathijssen, 2007) have used a single measure without distinguishing the role of each of the religious components.

### **Aims and hypothesis**

In the current study, we aimed to assess the association between specific religious components, namely, identification, beliefs and practices, and identification with heritage and/or mainstream cultures. Specifically, we study the relationship between religion and the acculturation of first-generation Muslim immigrants in Italy. Following Friedman and Saroglou (2010), this theoretical focus requires that we examine religion as an independent variable and acculturation as an outcome measure.

On the basis of the previously discussed literature, the present study considers religion a relevant element in Muslim immigrants' acculturation. This is partly because religion influences identity processes and partly because religion represents a challenge for Muslim immigrants in European countries. Indeed, these immigrants "have to negotiate a place for the cultural systems of their countries of origin – usually marked by the force and predominance of religion – within the cultural systems of their adopted European countries often marked by secularization" (Saroglou & Mathijssen, 2007, p. 178). In the present study, *identification* is defined as the attachment to one's religious group, and *beliefs* are conceptualized as a personal dimension regarding faith matters. Finally, *practices* are conceived as the adoption of prescribed behaviors.

We hypothesize the following: (a) a positive relationship between the three components and the maintenance of the heritage culture and (b) a negative relationship between the adoption of mainstream culture and the *practices* component of religion. This dimension, composed of

traditional clothes, prayers and dietary habits, is likely the most difficult to negotiate because of its impact on the relationship with the secularized outgroup.

## **Method**

### *Procedure*

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling in two cities of the northern part of Italy in the autumn and winter of 2014. We contacted the participants through cultural secular associations, schools of Italian language and personal contacts. Participants completed a self-administered questionnaire that took approximately 20 minutes. Participants choose which linguistic version to complete among Italian, French and English; 93% chose the Italian version.

### *Participants*

This study enrolled 282 Muslim immigrants ( $M = 58.7\%$ ) whose age ranged from 18 to 74 years (mean = 35.5; Std. Dev. = 11.9). All participants came from the North-Africa Mediterranean area (Morocco: 73%; Egypt: 12%; Tunisia: 7%; Algeria; 5%; Other countries in the area: 3%) and their mean residence time was 10 years (range 0-36; St. Dev. = 7.9). The mean of their years of education was 11.3 (range 0-24; St. Dev. = 5.2). Participants' employment status in Italy was: 37% unskilled works; 15% skilled works; 33% unemployed or homemaker, 10% student (other works conditions: 5%).

### *Instruments*

The participants rated items and answered questions about different topics. The indicators in our analyses were the following.

*Acculturation.* The *Vancouver Index of Acculturation* (VIA, Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000) was used. The scale assesses various aspects, such as participation in cultural traditions, social activities, values, and entertainment of both the host (10 items) and the heritage (10 items) culture. Items were scored on a 4-point Likert-type format. The two items dealing with marriage were excluded from the analysis because participants found it difficult to answer the item "*I would be willing to marry*



*an Italian person*" (host culture version). The Cronbach's alphas were .87 and .84 for the 9-item host and 9-item heritage subscales, respectively.

*Religious dimensions.* To assess the *identification* dimension we used a modified version of the *Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure-Revised* (MEIM-R, Phinney & Ong, 2007), in which, "ethnic group" was substituted by "religious group". Our choice was based on the above-discussed overlap between religions and cultures (Saroglou & Cohen, 2013) and was supported by the findings of Ashdown et al. (2014). The MEIM-R consists of 6 items scored on a 4-point Likert-type format. The Cronbach's alpha was .82. To assess religious *belief* and *practice*, we used four items from the *Comprehensive Measure of Islamic Religiosity* (CMIR, Tiliouine & Belgoumidi, 2009). For the beliefs dimension, we used "*I rely on God's help in hard times*" and "*I take the Prophet as a model in my life*" (Cronbach's alpha=.78). The two items used as indicators of the practices dimension were "*I usually dress in accordance with my religion*" and "*I usually recite some traditional prayers*" (Cronbach's alpha=.69). The four items' response codes ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (always).

*Socio-demographic information.* At the end of the questionnaire, the participants were asked to provide socio-demographic information (gender, age, years of education, residence time in Italy, state of birth and employment status).

#### *Data analysis*

To evaluate the relationship between acculturation and religion, two multiple regression models were performed that defined the acculturation scores as dependent variables and the three religious scores (identification, practices and beliefs) as independent variables. Regression coefficients were adjusted for the following covariates: gender, years of education, employment status and percentage of lifetime spent in Italy. The variance inflation factor (VIF) was used to evaluate the presence of multicollinearity, using a cut-off of 2.5.  $R^2$  statistics was used to assess model fit. The data were analyzed by SPSS 22.

## **Results**

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the religion dimensions and acculturation.

INSERT TAB 1 ABOUT HERE

All the correlations reported in Table 1 were statistically significant, and their signs were coherent with theoretical expectations. Specifically, the three religion dimensions were positively correlated with themselves and with heritage acculturation scores, although they showed a negative correlation with mainstream acculturation scores.

The association between religious components and acculturation scores was assessed by two regression models in which gender, years of education, employment condition and the percentage of lifetime spent in Italy were used as control variables. Overall, the regression analysis performed well. As shown in Table 2, the  $R^2$  statistics were good in both models. Gender was not statistically related to any of the acculturation scores. Years of education showed a statistically significant positive association with the host culture, and percentage of lifetime spent in Italy was significantly related to both forms of cultural identification. Specifically, the longer the lifetime spent in Italy, the lower the score on the heritage culture and the higher the score on the mainstream culture dimensions. With regard to employment status, only the association between student condition and heritage culture scores was statistically significant. In particular, being a student, compared to the reference category unemployment/homemaker, was negatively associated with the maintenance and enhancement of heritage culture. Moving to the statistically significant association with the religious dimensions, identification scores (MEIM-R) were positively related to those of the heritage culture, and both practices and beliefs scores were negatively related to Italian culture. In terms of beta coefficients, the strength of association was greater for practice scores (-.29,  $p < .01$ ) than for belief scores (-.13,  $p < .05$ ).

INSERT TAB 2 ABOUT HERE

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The aim of the current study was to investigate the associations among identification, beliefs and practices and attitudes toward both the heritage and host cultures in a group of Muslim immigrants.

Regression analyses showed that, as hypothesized, the *identification* dimension was related to the maintenance of the heritage culture, whereas no relation emerged between cultural maintenance and the other two dimensions.

The expected negative association between *practices* and identification with the host culture was found. The strength of the relation was high and was comparable to that of a well-known predictor of acculturation, the percentage of lifetime spent in the host country (Miglietta & Tartaglia, 2009; Ryder et al., 2000). A negative relation, albeit weaker than the previous one, was also observed for the *beliefs* dimension.

Consistent with the literature (Berry et al. 2006; 2010), the study highlighted the relevance of religion for the acculturation process and the role of group identification in the maintenance of the culture of origin. Beliefs and practices are negatively associated with mainstream culture adoption, likely because they make salient the cultural differences between the heritage and mainstream cultures. As Güngör and colleagues affirm (2011, p. 1357), “Through similarity (e.g., religious dress codes) and synchronicity (e.g., daily prayers or breaking the fast), religion powerfully shapes shared social realities within religious communities”. In other words, religion plays key meaning-making and world-making functions that may help to prevent faithful people from experiencing the “risks” associated with the alternate values and religion offered by the host Western societies.

Contrary to our expectation, beliefs and practices were not associated with the maintenance of the heritage culture. More precisely, beliefs and practices were positively related to heritage when the relation was assessed through Pearson’s correlation, but this relation vanished when controlling for the identification dimension in the regression model. These results suggest that the identity dimension of religion contributes to the maintenance of the heritage culture, whereas the behavioral and spiritual dimensions do not.

Overall, this study contributes by illuminating the different roles played by the components of religion in Muslim immigrants' acculturation process. However, this research suffers from some limitations, particularly its cross-sectional research design, which prevents a causal understanding of the pattern of findings. Moreover, the investigated sample was not balanced with respect to the respondents' country of origin (Moroccans were over-represented). Finally, the indicators of Muslims' religious beliefs and practices should be improved to consider the differences between Islamic teachings and Islamic practice among the various Muslim ethnic groups.

Future studies should analyze this topic by comparing immigrants from different faiths who have settled in EU countries with different religious traditions (i.e., Protestant) or areas that are more secularized than Italy, where Catholicism is still rooted in cultural habits. In this cross-religious perspective, the *Multi-Religion Identity Measure* (MRIM, Abu-Rayya, Abu-Rayya, & Khalil, 2009) could be a useful tool, particularly due to its item response format that includes a "non-applicable" category for atheists and people without a religious affiliation.

Because of the distrust Muslims must face from members of host societies caused by the supposed relationship between the Muslim faith and terrorism, future research should investigate whether and how individuals' perceptions of hostility toward Muslims or Islam may affect acculturation (Berry et al., 2010).

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